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The Past---and Future---of the CIA

Sooner or later one of those game companies will come out with a CIA game. Land on a Castro assassination plot and you advance 10 points to Senate inquiry and other shake of the dice. With one revelation after another through the sieve of Washington leaks, it has all come to sound like a piece of unreal gamesmanship.

It is in fact a profoundly serious business with a great deal at stake for the future of the nation. Only partly surfaced thus far, the fear in the Executive branch is that the intelligence apparatus is being destroyed. And this concern relates particularly to the inter-lock with intelligence operations in friendly countries.

We are just not getting reports. Britain is an example, that might be traced back to a source, says an official with responsibility for intelligence outside the CIA. The fear is that within a week the source would be named in newspaper stories and that would be the end of a channel of information.

Our opposite numbers abroad, says this same official, simply cannot understand what is happening when they see the American intelligence system apparently being torn to ribbons. They ask what it means about the stability of government in Washington and the future of an appartus that more than any other is looked to for a careful appraisal of the power structure between East and West.

At the same time the committee of inquiry headed by Sen. Frank Church is proceeding with closed-door hearings through the August recess. With a professional staff of 70 including former CIA executives, former ambassadors, FBI agents and others with a direct connection with intelligence gathering at home and abroad, the committee is engaged in a thorough review of the entire operation.

Thus far not a single leak has come from the committee on which Democrats and Republicans are working in close cooperation. The same cannot be said for the Rockefeller commission which concluded by shoving off on the Senate the whole assassination allegation. It is this that currently absorbs the Church committee.

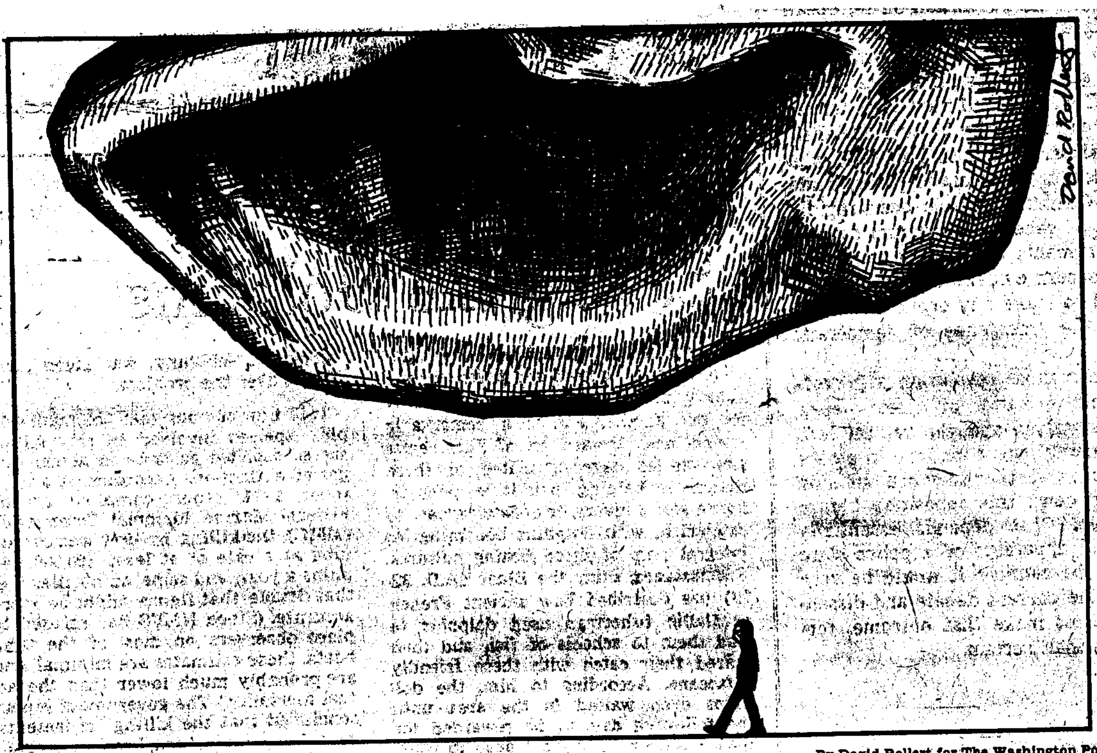
The flood of leaks from a variety of sources has generated an atmosphere of suspicion and distrust. The motivation behind those leaks is one of the dubious elements. Politics, and the politics of revenge, is surely one motive. Competitive reporting by the media, giving the old CIA one more lump, is another factor. The White House is suspected among those with knowledge of the whole business of some of the leaks, the motivation being to discredit earlier administrations.

President Ford said not long ago that the CIA was in serious danger of being crippled. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger has said privately it has already been crippled.

In the opinion of this observer revelation of the crimes of the intelligence agencies in violation of the guarantees of the Constitution must run its course. But out of the responsible inquiry of the Senate committee with its broad writ of authority should come acceptance of a plan for oversight of a CIA and an FBI purged of past abuses.

While it may be too early for such a plan, Sen. Gaylord Nelson (D-Wis.), joined by 14 other senators, Republicans and Democrats, called for legislative action by March 1, 1976. In a statement when he put forward his proposal he said:

"There can be no question that America needs an efficient and productive intelligence apparatus. The nature of the work requires secrecy and nonpartisanship. But these requirements, in turn, demand that the agencies involved adhere to constitutional and legal guidelines; for only then can the agencies avoid the controversy



By David Rollert for The Washington Post

which has recently enveloped them."

That is eminent good sense. It is well to recall Richard Nixon's flight from the presidency of just a year ago. With some of the abuses built into the system, particularly by the FBI, he might have chosen to defy the edicts of Congress and the country and stay in power. Fortunately he resigned.

On the other side of the world Prime Minister Indira Gandhi chose to destroy India's fragile democracy rather than yield to the processes of the law. Retaining her power by overriding every right of a free people she has shown the world a fearful example of the corruption of power. We cannot be too complacent, given the glaring abuses coming to light, yet hopefully we shall survive the current ordeal.

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